

LOVE IS A MANY SPLENDORED THING

Dr. John Allan Lavender
I Cor. 13

Sammy Fain and Francis Webster are the co-composers of a beautiful song now riding the crest of a wave of popularity. In fact, their lovely melody is number one on the hit parade of our nation. And, while St. Paul never met these two gentlemen, he would not be at odds with the words which have won their way into our hearts:

¶Love is a many splendored thing
It is the April rose that only grows in the early spring
It is Nature's way of giving a reason to be living
The golden crown that makes a man a King.¶

Of course, the love about which these two song writers are speaking is that love in which it is possible for us to be. Or fall. That stupendous state in which we feel a feeling we never felt before.

But Paul, in his magnificent poem, is not writing about that wonderful experience we call ¶falling¶ or ¶being¶ in love. Rather, he is speaking about the glory and majesty of love itself and, in so doing, has undertaken a nearly impossible task.

For who can define this greatest of all virtues? Where are the adjectives and superlatives capable of plumbing the depth of love? We turn to the dictionaries for an answer and they fall far short. We leaf through the pages of histories greatest bards and their lines of gold seem strangely cold when they try to fix the boundaries of love. Only Paul's magnificent poem comes anywhere close to describing it, and even then he requires divine inspiration to do so. For in the last analysis: God is Love. And therefore it is as humanly impossible to define love as it is to define God. We can only say in reverence and humility:

¶Love Is A Many Splendored Thing.¶

Now, this great chapter which forms our text for today is divided into three parts, each of which describes a separate quality of love.

Paul begins by comparing love to the other great values people have come to prize, and by so doing he shows that love is a many splendored thing because of

Its Preeminence over Every Other Value and Virtue.

A Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am become as sounding brass and tinkling cymbal A (Verse 1).

Here, Paul contrasts love with eloquence. And what a grand gift is possessed by the person who can play upon the souls and wills of people with words. Moving them to tears. Regaling them with laughter. Rousing them to lofty purposes and holy deeds.

But Paul, who probably possessed a greater portion of this particular gift than any other person of his time, was quick to say:

A Though I speak with the combined eloquence of men and angels and am destitute of love, I am a blaring trumpet and a clanging cymbal A

And we all know why, don't we! For we all have experienced the hollowness, the brazenness, the agonizing unpersuasiveness of words without emotion. Of eloquence behind which lies no love.

For without a deep sense of caring, our words are meaningless. They are harsh, abrasive, and devoid of power. And so, while a way with words is a gift to be desired, Paul says that to possess love is better still.

A And though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries, and though I have all faith, so that I can remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing A (Verse 2).

The incredible thing about Paul's argument is that he chooses to contrast love with some of the highest gifts that people can possess. Things which are in themselves distinct gifts of God. The power of discernment. The gift of knowledge. The treasure of victorious faith.

Now, obviously he is not suggesting these things are worthless. To the contrary, he acknowledges their tremendous value and gives the impression that if we can possess any or all of these superlative gifts, we would join the ranks of those who have everything.

And then, with a stroke of the pen, he writes:

ATo have them all and be devoid of love is to cancel their value. I am nothing he says.

Note that!

ANot something less than I could be. I am nothing.A

Paul says love is greater than prophecy. And why? Because what God is is more important than what God does. Repeatedly the Bible tells of God revealing some hidden secret of the Faith to someone, but nowhere does the Bible say: AGod is Prophecy.@ It does say: AGod is Love.@ And what God is, is greater than what God does.

Love is greater than knowledge, Paul says, because the cause is greater than the effect. Love is the prime cause of our whole existence. Out of God's desire to love and be loved came our world and all which we call life. Our very ability to study, the think, to know, is the result of his creative love. And, as such, these abilities are on inestimable value. But we must never forget that the cause (love) is greater than the effect (knowledge).

Furthermore, Paul states that love is greater than faith. And why? Because the end is greater than the means. The road by which we come to God is the road of faith. But the purpose of our coming to God is that we might love Him and experience all it means to be loved by Him. The means is faith. The end is love. And the end is greater than the means.

And then Paul adds:

¶Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned and have not love, it profiteth me nothing¶ (Verse 3).

Here he compares love with the act of giving, and he argues that the motive is greater than the deed. We live in a day of organized charity. The tin cup and back-porch handouts have been replaced by the government bureau and the Social Service Committee. We have arrived at the era of scientific giving based upon a rule by the Internal Revenue Service that our donation to a specific project is deductible. The pressing question: ¶Is it needed?@ has been replaced by the perplexing concern: ¶Is it deductible?@

Statistics have taken the place of sympathy and social workers have taken the place of individual service. But, true giving is not a matter of statistics. It is not a carefully calculated thing. It is not concerned with the amount, but with the motive. It recognizes that little is much when love is in it and much is nothing when love is not in it. It is possible, you see, for charity to exist without love and, when it does, it is meaningless.

You can labor long and arduously for your church. You can give sacrificially to the Kingdom cause. You can, for the sake of your convictions, be ridiculed and even martyred. But, if you have not love, it will profit you and the cause of Christ exactly nothing.

And then, after describing love's preeminence over every other value and virtue, Paul hastens on to explain that this preeminence of love is derived from the properties of love. He declares that love is a many splendored thing because of

Its Attributes and its Properties

In Verses 4-7 we have what someone has called the spectrum of love. Like light which, when passed through a prism, breaks up into its component colors: red, yellow, blue, and all the colors of the

rainbow, so too love, when passed through the magnificent prism of Paul's inspired intellect is broken up into its component parts and in four brief, but sublime sentences, Paul describes ten attributes, or ingredients, from which love is made. And notice, please, they are things with which we are very familiar. They are called by common names. They are virtues about which we hear every day. They are not so great they cannot be achieved. Instead, they are attributes which can, and should, be practiced by everyone in every phase of life.

See if you can identify these ten ingredients as I read:

ALove suffereth long, and is kind;
Love envieth not;
Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,
Doth not behave itself unseemly,
Seeketh not its own,
Is not easily provoked,
Thinketh no evil;
Rejoiceth not in inequity, but rejoiceth in the truth;
Love beareth all things, believeth all
things, hopeth all things, and endureth
all things. (Verses 4-7).

First, ALove Suffereth Long®

Paul says the first attribute of love is patience. This is what we might call love in its normal state. True love is placid, calm, composed. True love has poise. And even though indignity is heaped upon indignity, and provocation is added to provocation, true love never loses its cool. ALove suffereth l-o-n-g. A

Second, AAnd Is Kind®

This is love in action. Patience is passive endurance, but kindness is positive service. Someone has

said:

APatience is love sitting with folded hands, but kindness is love working with busy hands. Patience is being good. Kindness is doing good.®

And that's what our world needs so desperately today.

When an eminent painter was commissioned to paint a portrait of Alexander The Great, he was faced with a serious difficulty. In one of his many battles, Alexander had been struck with a sword and his forehead bore an ugly scar. If the artist left the scar in the portrait, it would be offensive to those who admired the Monarch. If he left it out, it would not be a perfect likeness. So, in his painting, he posed the conquering hero in a pensive mood, leaning on his elbow, with his forefinger upon his brow as if he were in deep contemplation. Thus, by a seeming *accident*, the artist was able to cover the scar.

I have often wondered if we might not do well to follow that example. Wherever we find the wounds of past sin and weakness in a brother or sister, to gently place the finger of loving kindness upon the scar, rather than doing what we have often done: gleefully making it darker and starker than it really is. ALove suffereth long--- and is kind.®

Third, ALove Envieth Not®

Here the attribute is generosity. Not the generosity which gives well, but the generosity which thinks well. When Paul says that *love envieth not* he means that love has the ability to rejoice in another person's success. And how hard that is at times.

Even in Christian circles there are those who *bite their blankets* with envy every time someone else prospers more than they. Or succeeds more than they. Or is recognized more than they.

I know of a man who quit a church because the pastor was given a salary which exceeded his. The poor fellow never bothered to take into account the fact that his minister not only had a college

degree, but three years of graduate study and after a number of years of practical experience had earned a place in the top four or five percent of his profession. To be kind when someone else is in need is one thing. To be happy when someone else prospers is another. But that is a property of love, for love is not jealous.

ALove envieth not. @

Fourth, ALove Vaunteth Not Itself@

And then Paul says that if and when we master the art of patience, kindness and generosity, we must learn humility for ALove vaunteth not itself. @

In other words, after we have been patient, kind and generous, we are to seal our lips and forget what we have done! We are to hide our goodness from ourself! That's what the Bible means when it says:

ADo not let your right hand know what your left hand doeth@ (Matt. 6:3).

Some people have used that text as an excuse for not pledging or giving by record. Nothing could more tragically distort the meaning of the text. It is your right hand that is not to know what your left hand is doing lest you become proud of your deeds and thus destroy the value of them. You are to keep things from yourself! That is, you are not to become a Little Jack Horner who must constantly reassure himself with the words, AWhat a good boy am I. @ Indeed, ALove vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up. @

Fifth, ALove Doth Not Behave Itself Unseemly@

The fifth ingredient is courtesy, as we read in Verse 5.

ALove doth not act unbecomingly. @

All of us want to get something out of life. But Paul says love will help us be something in life. It will help us be courteous and considerate. Gentlemen and ladies, if you will. Remembering that a gentleman or gentlewoman is Aone who does things gently with love. @

Now, that's not a sign of weakness unless you're prepared to call Jesus a weakling. He was anything but that!! He was meek, but He was not weak. Instead, he had that beautiful mixture of toughness

and tenderness which is a picture of true humanity, and which is the ultimate of gentleness and the epitome of strength.

ALove doth not behave itself unseemly.®

Sixth, ALove Seeketh Not Her Own®

And this, of course, is unselfishness. The kind of selflessness which does not grasp for its rights, but is prepared to give up its rights in order to do what is right. Or to see that right prevails.

ALove seeketh not her own.®

Seventh, AIs Not Easily Provoked®

That is to say, love is even tempered. The other day I heard someone refer to their mate as being *even tempered - mad all the time!*® Well, love is not irritable. It is even tempered. The King James Version puts it this way: ALove is not easily provoked.® But, in the original text the word *easily*® is not to be found. It simply says: Love is not provoked at all!

And what a blow that is to some of us. We are so inclined to look upon bad temper as a harmless weakness. A mere infirmity of nature. A family failing. An inherited frailty. As if it were not very serious. But, the truth is that no form of vice does more to hinder the cause of Christ than an uncontrolled temper. When it comes to embittering life, destroying sacred relationships, devastating homes, withering men and crushing women; in short, when it comes to sheer misery-producing power, an uncontrolled temper beats them all. An ugly temper heads the list.

And the tragedy is that so very often it is the vice of the virtuous. Time and again it is the one blot on an otherwise spotless character. That is not to say that temper does not have its place. As a matter of fact, temper is as important to the strength of character as it is to the strength of steel. But it must be controlled. It must be harnessed. It must be channeled into constructive and corrective effort. It must not be turned loose without a lease. It must be under the Spirit's control.

ALove is not provoked.®

Eighth, AThinketh No Evil®

And then Paul says that love is charitable. It *Athinketh no evil*@ (Verse 5).

Love does not keep a ledger of the other fellows weakness. It thinks the best. It puts down any temptation to be suspicious and has no memory of past injuries. Love not only forgives, it forgets or, at least, attempts to put a new and more positive meaning on the memory. Love chooses not to dwell on negative thoughts which are destructive to relationships, even to the relationship we have with ourselves!

Ninth, *ARejoiceth Not in Iniquity*@

What's more, love is sincere. It

Arejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth@ (Verse 6).

Love has no pretense. It does not say one thing to a person's face and another behind that person's back. Love does not secretly gloat over someone else's faults or failures. *AOh, I don't do that!*@ you say. Perhaps not, at least not consciously. But, how many times have you justified a personal weakness by thinking or perhaps even saying: *AIt's no worse than what other people do.*@ By that simple bit of rationalization you are *Arejoicing in iniquity.*@ In a kind of roundabout way, you are using another person's weakness to take yourself off the hook.

Tenth, *ABeareth, Believeth, Hopeth and Endureth All Things*@

Finally, in Verse 7, Paul says love is gracious. It bears, believes, hopes and endures all things.

Someone has said love is blind. Nothing could be further from the truth. Love does not see less; it sees more. Love sees all. Knows all. And yet, continues to love.

Love is only blind in the sense that it deliberately chooses to be blind. Love shuts its eyes to defects in order that it might center its attention on possibilities. It looks and listens for everything which is lovely and of good report and then fosters it, waters it, helps it grow. Thus it is that love brings gladness where there might be sadness and beauty where there might be ashes.

Indeed, love is a many splendored thing! Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is generous. Love is humble. Love is courteous. Love is unselfish. Love is even-tempered. Love is charitable. Love is sincere. And love is gracious.

As someone has said:

ALove is a fire in whose devouring flames all earthly ills are consumed.®

And then, as his poem draws to a close, Paul gives his third reason for holding up love as the highest of all virtues -- the greatest of all values -- and he speaks of its permanence. He says that ALove Is A Many Splendored ThingA because of

3. Its PermanenceBLove Abides!

ALove never faileth® (Verse 8).

There is something lost in the translation here, for in the original Greek text, Paul really says love is Aa flower whose petals never fall.®

The illustration is alive with meaning for even the most calloused heart. Is there one of us who has not been moved by the rich, red beauty of a rose only to see its color fade and its petals shrivel up and die? Well, Paul says this Amany splendored thingA called love, this flower of preeminent beauty, will never fade. Its petals will never fall. Put simply: In never fails!

And then, in Verse 8, he refers us back to Verses 1-3 and shows that these highly coveted things (eloquence, prophetic insight, knowledge) are not only secondary, they are also transitory. They do not last.

AWhether there be prophecies, they shall fail. Whether there be tongues, they shall cease. Whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.A

Prophecies shall fail because they are fulfilled. One by one their work is ended and they have no further usefulness.

Tongues shall cease because the purpose and people they served have passed away. Greek and Hebrew, the languages of the Bible, are no longer dominant as they once were. Latin is dead or dying. What can be said of these ancient languages will, in God's good time, be said of all tongues and dialects as the purposes and people they serve move off the stage of history.

But Paul goes further, and with even greater boldness adds:

AWhether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.®

Of course, we know what he means. The text books I used in college a few short years ago are outmoded. Yesterday's encyclopedias can be purchased for a song. The grammar school boy of today knows more than Sir Isaac Newton knew in his day.

The knowledge of the past has, indeed, vanished away. And yet, with all our advances in science and technology, we still stand with Paul saying: AWe know in part..® Our knowledge is sketchy. The more we know, the more we know we need to know. For almost hourly, our knowledge vanishes away.

There are other things Paul might have mentioned to substantiate his argument that things do not last. Money, fame, power. But speaking to the people of his time, he picked those values and capacities his contemporaries prized the most. The ability to prophesy. The ability to speak fluently. The ability to possess great knowledge. And, without hesitation, Paul brushes them aside.

He doesn't quarrel with their values. He doesn't say they are unimportant. He simply says they do not last. They are good things, but they are not supreme things. There are values which supersede them. And what are they?

AFaith. Hope. Love. And the greatest of these is Love.®

There are some students of the Word who believe that even faith and hope will not last. They point out that faith will pass into sight and hope will pass into reality. They may be right. But one thing is sure. Love will last. For love is of God, and God is eternal.

So covet that one lasting gift. Seek that one thing which is certain to go on going on. Desire that one supreme value which shines preeminently above all others, that **AMany Splendored Thing@** whose beauty never fades and whose petals never fall.

* Readers familiar with the work of Henry Drummond and G. Campbell Morgan will recognize the many ways in which I drew upon these two great scholars in preparing this sermon.

As a closing comment, I pointed out the great discrepancy between our **Aloves@** and the ideal as Paul describes it. Suggested steps were offered to help narrow the gap:

My love is so inadequate when compared to Paul's description.

Exactly! Confess that fact. Accept God's cleansing. Use the love you have, remembering the law of life:

AThings beget their kind.® If used, love will beget love.

Finally, read (I Cor.13) every day for a month.